

**A ZOO EXPERIENCE FOR THE
VISUALLY IMPAIRED**

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It was an exciting day indeed in July this year when a book, "ZOO ANIMALS" was launched by the Victorian Minister of Education at the Royal Melbourne Zoo,¹ Australia, after nearly five years of preparation exciting because this marked the beginning of a new experience for the visually impaired a zoo experience!

"ZOO ANIMALS" was produced by "Friends of the Zoos Ltd." (FOTZ), the voluntary support group of Victoria's three public zoos.² It certainly is not the only book about zoo animals to be published, of course, but we do believe that FOTZ has produced the first such book specially printed for visually impaired people.

Royal Melbourne Zoo (RMZ) has remained on its present site since 1862 when it received a government grant of 55 acres in Royal Park, close to the city of Melbourne. It is beautifully landscaped and, despite its small size, has been acclaimed internationally as one of the great zoos of the world.

Friends of the Zoos Ltd. (FOTZ) was formed in 1980 in response to community interest expressed by members of the public who wanted to become actively involved with the zoos. Within a few months the idea of a voluntary guide service to assist members of the public was proposed and the first guide training course began in 1981. This course was at RMZ and was conducted by a committee led by an active FOTZ member, who was also a Reader in Zoology at the University of Melbourne, together with enthusiastic members of the Zoo curatorial staff and teachers from the Zoo Education Service. These

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1. Melbourne is the capital city of the State of Victoria in the south-east of Australia.
 2. The three public zoos in Victoria are all under the control of the Zoological Board of Victoria.
 - * Royal Melbourne Zoological Gardens (RMZ);
 - * The Sir Colin McKenzie Zoological Park (Healesville Sanctuary) for Australian native animals, 40 miles to the north of Melbourne;
 - * Werribee Zoological Park, the open range zoo, about 30 miles to the west of Melbourne.

busy people all gave unstintingly of their time and expertise on this initial course and continue to be readily available for the monthly in-service for the voluntary guides. The first group of twenty voluntary guides, all members of FOTZ, were of all ages and from all walks of life, most with no previous experience of working in a zoo environment. The eight week course provided the guides with an overview of all aspects of zoo management and a general background of the animals at RMZ. There are now over 200 voluntary guides available on roster every day of the week at both RMZ and at Healesville Sanctuary to conduct tours and to generally assist the Zoo visitors.

Attention to facilities for disabled visitors has been part of the service at the zoos and, as the voluntary guide service grew, a Committee for Guiding the Disabled was formed and is convened by one of the FOTZ guides who was also a "reader" for a blind Law student at the University of Melbourne. One day the student wanted to know the actual size of a giraffe. Now, how do you explain dimension to someone who knows her surroundings only by touch, sound and smell? Arrangements were made for the student to visit the Zoo's Education Centre where a giraffe skin had been placed on the floor. The young woman crawled around and over that skin, completely absorbed in feeling its outline and texture. For the first time in her life she had some idea of the shape and proportion of a giraffe.

Also present in that room were several members of FOTZ Council and the Guide Committee and some of the teachers from the Zoo Education Service. All were fascinated by the thoroughness of the young woman's inspection. The group, accompanied by a Zoo Education teacher, then adjourned to one of the classrooms and the teacher gave a demonstration on how to handle some of the animals in the room: the corn-snake (non-venomous), small lizards and tortoises and a tiny ring-tailed possum. Housed in this classroom was also a large python which the student was able to handle. The snake gradually

wound itself around her waist and twined its tail firmly around the strap of her handbag. The student showed no fear, only great interest, commenting on its weight!

This approach to the animals was a new experience for the guides, too. The members of the group that day observed not only how to handle the animals in the classroom but also to appreciate the delicate, sensitive touch of a blind person and the interest shown in experiencing the different shapes of the animals and the texture of their skins. At the end of the afternoon the question was raised as to whether it would be worthwhile guiding visually impaired people in the Zoo to let them "see" some of the animals. There was definite agreement and a sub-committee was formed to examine the prospects.

The first meeting of that sub-committee was held on April 16th, 1985, with representatives from the Zoo Education Service, the Braille and Talking Book Library and FOTZ Council and guides. At the second meeting, in July, a representative from the Tactual Graphics unit in the Melbourne University Geography Department and a teacher from the Burwood School for the Blind joined the committee. It was at this meeting that the idea of producing a braille book about the animals in the Zoo was mooted. It was decided that the book should cater for adult visitors but at the same time the text should be kept fairly simple to appeal to children as well. It was thought that such a book could be read prior to a visit to the Zoo. Shortly after this second committee meeting a FOTZ member was appointed to write the text and an artist and cartographer commissioned to provide the graphics.

The six animals selected for inclusion in this trial braille book were representative of the main sub-divisions in the animal kingdom: bearded dragon, giraffe, gorilla, platypus, sulphur-crested cockatoo and the wanderer butterfly. The text of the book has been produced by computer and, included in the introduction are maps of RMZ, also the distribution of animals and

world habitats together with "pie charts" showing the proportion of animal types. For sighted readers the drawings of the animals which accompany the text may appear to be lacking some details, but it has been pointed out that it is the outline more than the detail which conveys the shape of an animal. Many visually impaired people have no conception of shape, weight and dimension so, to give an indication, comparisons are made with the height and weight of an adult person.

When the book, to be called "ZOO ANIMALS", reached the trialling stage, it was decided that a separate sub-committee be responsible for the production. A second sub-committee was formed to be responsible for guiding the visually impaired. The book was then trialled with visually impaired children and adults. At the same time, the sub-committee for Guiding the Disabled approached the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (RVIB) and two workshops for the voluntary guides were arranged. During these workshops the guides worked in pairs, one person being blind-folded, experiencing what it is like to be visually impaired. Many felt it is a frightening and exhausting experience to go out into the Zoo blind-folded even although one may have confidence in the guiding partner. During these sessions the guides learnt how to greet a blind person, how to offer their arm, how to approach steps, gutters, doors, seats etc. and when to suggest a rest.

Following both these workshops, a Zoo Education teacher took the group into the classrooms where the guides learnt how to handle the animals housed there. It was also explained to them how to check the temperature of the enclosures, how to be aware of any stress in the animal while being handled, and also how to assist a visually impaired person to hold an animal. There is now a group of specially trained FOTZ guides who work with the visually impaired. It is compulsory for each of these guides to attend a class once a month while a teacher is giving a lesson. The guide acts as an aide to the teacher and at

the same time gains up-dated knowledge and experience in the handling of animals. One of the Zoo Education teachers has been appointed to roster the guides for their classes and act as their supervisor.

During the trialling of the book encouraging reports came back to the committee which included the delight of two blind parents being able to read a book to their sighted children for the first time. The children were able to study the illustrations themselves as their parents traced the outline with their fingers. Another example was given of children at a school for the blind who realised for the first time that the cockatoo could spread its crest feathers. Following the encouraging reponse to the trial it was agreed to add a further fourteen animals: Asian elephant, Australian fur seal, Australian pelican, emu, brown bear, crocodile, fairy penguin, koala, red kangaroo, lion, python, spider monkey, tiger and wombat. The completed book, "ZOO ANIMALS" covers twenty animals accompanied by appropriate drawings, maps and graphs, together with general information about Royal Melbourne Zoo and the Friends of the Zoos Ltd.

Early in 1988, all organisations connected with the visually impaired were advised of the special guided tours available. The Guide Service has received a good response and to date many visually impaired people from the R.V.I.B., the Association for the Blind, Royal Guide Dogs for the Blind Association of Australia and from private requests have been on special tours of the Zoo. Most groups arrive with helpers and, when a tour is booked, the guides volunteer to be present on the specified day. Arrangements are made to provide an adequate number of specially trained guides to work on a one to one ratio with the visitors.

Most tours include a visit to the classrooms in the Zoo Education section. There the visitors can handle the live animals under the supervision of the guides. In each classroom there are skins and bones, mounted animals and birds, as

well as small live animals such as reptiles, tortoises, frogs and possums.

A "hands-on" experience gives a visually impaired person an idea of the size and shape of the animal as well as the different textures of skin, fur, feathers, bone etc. One of the most popular of the mounted animals is the large polar bear. It is certainly a very exciting experience for the guides, too, to see the amazement and delight of their visitors as they "see" such a large animal for the first time in their lives. In the garden near the classroom are small enclosures housing wombats and echidnas. An enjoyable time is spent leaning over the enclosures feeling the wombats' fur and noting their behaviour, smell and warmth, or carefully feeling the echidnas and noting the prickly spines.

Guides are now much more aware of the significance of touch, sounds and smells which give added information to visually impaired people. In the grounds near one classroom telephone booths have been set up and these are connected to recordings of animal and bird calls. The visitor can dial any combination of numbers and through the headphone the sounds of zoo animals can be heard: the trumpeting of an elephant, the chitter-chatter of arboreal primates, the screech of a peacock, the roar of a lion, and there is great enjoyment trying to identify the sounds.

Following the visit to the classrooms the group then moves through the beautiful zoo grounds. RMZ is as famous for its beautifully landscaped gardens and simulated natural habitats as for the animals there. As the guides and their visitors make their way along the paths, trees are touched, leaves crushed and flowers smelt. At all time during the day, Zoo staff are going about their duties and are always ready to answer questions about a plant or an animal. Not infrequently the guides will notice that members of the public have discreetly joined the group and they share their reactions and comments, too.

Not all areas in the Zoo are suitable to be included in this special itinerary for visually impaired visitors but the guides always try to accommodate any special request. One area always included in this tour is the seal enclosure. There the visitors can inspect the life-size sculptures of the seals, touching their ears and flippers, hugging them or even sitting on them! The group then moves to the under-water viewing area where they can listen to the recorded sounds of the live seals in action in their pool and enjoy the excited comments from other visitors who are watching the seals through the large window. This is a very popular exhibit with all visitors.

Another fascinating exhibit is the Great Flight Aviary where visitors move along a walkway through rain-forest, wet-lands and scrub-land, experiencing the different atmosphere of each area. Sometimes blind people are nervous at hearing a bird fly so close with a rush of wind but there are many who do enjoy walking through this large aviary listening to the sounds and identifying bird calls as well as scents of plants. Another exhibit that is always a favourite place is the Butterfly House. The humidity always draws comments and the tropical plants and the bushes overhanging the walkway provide a constant source of interest. The possibility of a butterfly alighting on a visitor is ever present and visually impaired people are very sensitive to the light touch of a butterfly as it brushes past or even alights on a head or an arm. The tour is usually planned to end in the Butterfly House and then the group can relax in the nearby restaurant.

These tours are constantly being assessed and, such is the success of the venture at RMZ, a similar service is being developed for visually impaired visitors to the Healesville Sanctuary. When required, wheel-chairs are available for elderly or incapacitated visitors. Guide dogs are not permitted to enter the Zoo with their owners as RMZ is an animal quarantine station but provision has been made in an "off-limits" area where a dog can wait until its owner returns.

Over the three and a half years since this service for the visually impaired began at RMZ the guides have received many heart-warming reactions. There was the blind mother who had never experienced holding such a tiny soft animal as the sugar glider. She had often come to the Zoo with her sighted children but the general public is not able to move into the special classrooms where these animals can be handled. Visits to the classrooms are a never-ending source of delight and the guides often have to be very persuasive to move the visitors on! This "hands-on" experience in these rooms opens up a whole new world to visually impaired people. We remember the fourteen year old boy who, when asked if he wanted to handle the snake, responded: "Well, if you're game, I am!" Afterwards he brailled that the skin felt like vinyl! All visitors who do hold a snake are always amazed at feeling the muscle movements as it winds itself around. Then there was the young married couple, both blind, who were so interested in the birds and, to the delight of all around her, the young wife could identify the different calls and imitate them in perfect pitch!

The production of "ZOO ANIMALS" involved much research in many areas: selection of animals, writing the text, planning the art and graphics, method of production, raising the necessary funding all involving hundreds of hours over the five years. The braille text is in two volumes and the large print text is in one volume. The books are being donated by Friends of the Zoos Melbourne Australia to appropriate libraries which cater for the visually impaired in all states of Australia and to several in the U.K. and in U.S.A. It will be donated to the Zoo libraries in Australia, New Zealand and Singapore and to those which have shown interest in the U.K. and in U.S.A. The production of this book has been made possible only because of the voluntary input of so many people all of whom have given unstintingly of their time and expertise. The only people employed on a professional basis were the

cartographer³ and the artist as the graphics required the skills of these specialists. Additional major costs incurred were for the transcription, braille and graphic production.⁴

From the beginning FOTZ Council has given constant encouragement and financial support. The production cost of \$50,000 was funded by FOTZ to enable the project to proceed. FOTZ also gratefully acknowledges the significant donations from the Sidney Myer Fund, the R.E. Ross Trust and the Victorian Ministry of Education whose generous support assisted in meeting the costs of this publication.

"ZOO ANIMALS" is, as far as can be ascertained, a world-first production for visually impaired people. Any organisation interested in obtaining further information about the book may contact the Braille Book Committee, Friends of the Zoos Ltd., P.O. Box 161, Parkville, Victoria, 3052, Australia.

ENA DANIELSON,
Braille Book Committee

LILLIAS O'DEA,
Sub-Committee for Guiding the
Disabled

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3. From the Tactual Graphics Unit of the Geography Department at the University of Melbourne.
 4. Transcription and Braille production by Computerised Braille Production Unit, Royal N.S.W. Institute for Deaf and Blind Children.
Graphic production and large print by Avon Graphics in Victoria.

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